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Would-be POW rescuer held in Laos?

By Susan Katz
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The State Department is investigating reports that an American citizen was captured in Laos last month and is being held prisoner in its capital, Vientiane.

The unidentified man was seized Dec. 17 while on a privately financed mission to either rescue Americans believed held as prisoners of war or gather intelligence, according to U.S. and foreign sources. A second man was reported either killed or captured on the same date.

The men were among four Caucasians — at least two of whom were Americans — who allegedly entered Laos around Dec. 10. Their foray was cut short by a gunfight with Pathet Lao troops along the northwest Laotian border. Two of the men are thought to have escaped.

The captured American was interrogated by Soviet, East German and Bulgarian agents in Vientiane, sources say.

"We're concerned," said State Department spokesman Steve Johnson. "We've heard the same story from our sources in Thailand. Our people out there are on alert to find out if it's true. If these people were arrested, they had broken Lao law. But if people are being held, we're concerned. We would certainly try to visit them."

"They were captured," said a spokesman from the Vietnam mission to the United Nations. He then said the Vietnamese knew nothing about the episode, and that the Laotian Embassy would have information.

"I have no comment on this matter," said Chanthara Sayamoungkhoun, third secretary at the Laotian Embassy in Washington. "Get more details from the State Department. I don't have much on that. I have no authorization."

"The Pentagon is aware of all this, and is extremely nervous about it," said a source close to the U.S. government. "I was read an internal Pentagon report detailing the episode. They were vets who knew some people. They were trying to swipe POWs, or take a look at them. They went in with armed Laotians. They screwed up real bad."

"I have seen nothing on the matter," said Defense Department spokesman Lt. Col. Keith Schneider.

"I am totally satisfied that this occurred," said Tom Burch, president of the National Vietnam Veterans Coalition. "I have triple-checked on my best sources. These are very, very highly placed sources whose names you would recognize. I assure

you the Defense Intelligence Agency knows all about it."

Calls to Charles Trowbridge Jr., deputy chief of the POW/MIA division at DIA, were referred to Lt. Col. Schneider.

Pentagon officials are searching for the persons who organized the mission, according to a North Carolina attorney. Mark Waple, who represents Vietnam veterans Mark Smith and Melvin C. McIntyre in a POW-related suit against the U.S. government, said he had been contacted twice regarding the botched mission.

"Around the first or second week in December, I received a call from a source that I have, telling me that people were over there and their presence had been detected. It was a warning, telling me if I knew who was there, to tell them to get out. Then I got a call from [Defense De-

partment] officials in Washington, asking if my clients were involved. We had nothing to do with the attempt. None of my clients were involved."

The U.S. government learned of the mission in mid-December, sources say. "We picked up radio intelligence on an open-line communication," said the source who knew details of the Pentagon report.

"There was a radio intercept," said another source. "The Pathet Lao told the Vietnamese, 'We're chasing Caucasians.' The transmission was picked up in Thailand."

Although no news of the incident had appeared yet in the U.S. press, Mike Lavin, chief of information policy for the National Security Agency, said: "I saw that item in the paper. I know nothing about it, and wouldn't be able to comment on it if I did."

"He obviously read an internal report about it," said one source close to the U.S. government.

POW/MIA special interest groups have been trying to learn who was behind the mission, said Ted Sampley, deputy national coordinator for the National Vietnam Veterans Co-

alition. "It's the hottest thing going," he said.

"I won't confirm or deny or say anything about the mission," said Earl Hopper, leader of Task Force Omega, a privately run POW support group based in Arizona.

"I don't feel at this time that I can comment on it. I don't think it would be appropriate. I have heard the story. We haven't tried any rescue missions, but it's not beyond the realm of our constitution and by-laws."

"I would never do anything or have any part in anything like that," said Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot, who was named by another rescue-mission organizer as financier of the botched attempt.

"I am absolutely against that type of operation. There's a good chance you would kill more than you would rescue. The way to get people out is to pay per man released. Look at Asia's history. What happened in Asia with war prisoners? The sons of the wealthy got returned."

Mr. Perot said he has been involved in efforts to buy POWs out of Laos. "Sometimes we hear about ransom payments wanted. We respond to ransom requests. The price has varied, he said, but is "do-able — about \$25,000 per man."

None of the attempts has ever been successful, said Mr. Perot. "Nobody has ever made it. There's always a story why they haven't made it."

"I was asked to join a group going over Dec. 15," said the leader of Private Delta Force, which is training for a POW rescue mission. "They wanted to go through China into Cam Ranh Bay, capture some high-ranking Soviet officers, and hold them for ransom in exchange for POWs."

He did not join the mission, he said, because "I'm not into suicide." He said he thought the mission had been aborted.

Others who denied involvement were Bob Cressman of the Forget Me Nots, Tom Burch of the National Vietnam Veterans Coalition, and John Leboutilier of Operation Skyhook II. A woman who answered the phone at the Nevada home of James "Bo" Gritz said that Mr. Gritz was out of the country, but she did not specify where.